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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 PM-04 MC-02 OMB-01 ACDA-05 EB-07

COME-00 TRSE-00 IGA-02 AID-05 NEAE-00 NSC-05 SP-02

SS-15 H-02 CIAE-00 DODE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00 PA-01

USIA-06 PRS-01 /088 W

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P 031455Z FEB 76

FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0021

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY LONDON

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 0850

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR PINT IS US

SUBJECT: CRITICISM OF MOD ARMS REQUEST EVOKES DOMESTIC STORM

SUMMARY: CRITIQUE OF MOD ARMS REQUEST "SHOPPING LIST" DURING "SENIOR OFFICIAL'S" BACKGROUNDER TO ISRAELI WASHINGTON PRESS CORPS HAS EVOKED DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONTROVERSY OF UNPREDICATABLE PROPORTIONS. REMARKS ARE SEEN HERE AS ATTACK ON DEFENSE MINISTER PERES AND COS GUR. IN BACKGROUND IS MIX OF LONG-STANDING CONTROVERSY BETWEEN PRIME MINISTERS'S OFFICE AND MOD OVER RESUPPLY PRIORITIES IN FACE OF BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS AND RABIN-PERES RIVALRY WITHIN RULING LABOR PARTY. IN ADDITION TO SHARP PRESS CIRITICISM, LIKUD HAS INTRODUCED NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION. WHILE INCIDENT DOES NOT NECESSARILY PRESAGE POLITICAL CRISIS, LATEST FLAP HAS GIVEN FRESH AMMUNITION TO RABIN'S CRITICS WITHIN AND OUT-SIDE LABOR PARTY. END SUMMARY.

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1. OFF-THE-RECORD STATEMENT BY "SENIOR OFFICIAL"
IN RABIN'S PARTY (ASSUMED TO BE PRIME MINISTER HIMSELF)
IN BRIEFING TO ISRAELI WASHINGTON PRESS CORPS LAST WEEK,
CLAIMING THAT ISRAELI REQUEST FOR MILITARY ASSISTANCE
WAS GROSSLY EXAGGERATED, HAS GENERATED STORM OF
CRITICISM IN ISRAELI POLITICAL CIRCLES. ACCORDING
TO LOCAL PRESS, "SENIOR SOURCE" SAID THAT ISRAELI
MILITARY SHOPPING LIST WAS "NOT A CERTIFICATE OF
HONOR FOR ISRAEL," AND ADDED THAT ORIGINAL LIST--
SUBSEQUENTLY SCALED DOWN --CONTAINED GADGETS THAT WERE
NOT NECESSARY FOR ISRAEL'S SECURITY.

2. DOMESTIC REACTION HAS BEEN BOTH SWIFT AND HARSH.
ISRAELI PRESS, PARTICULARLY PRESTIGIOUS INDEPENDENT
HAARETZ, HAS BEEN VERY SEVERE IN ITS CRITICISM
OF RABIN. COMMENTATORS HAVE CHARGED THAT INCIDENT
HAS DAMAGED ISRAEL'S CREDIBILITY IN ADMINISTRATION
CIRCLES, STRENGTHENING THE HAND OF ITS CIA DEFENSE
CRITICS AND WEAKENING ITS SUPPORTERS. ISRAELI
MILITARY AID REQUESTS HENCEFORTH, IT IS NOTED, ARE
LIKELY TO BE SUBJECTED TO EVEN MORE REGOROUS SCRUTINY
THAN IN THE PAST. DEFECTS IN ISRAELI DECISION-MAKING
PROCESS HAVE BEEN GLARINGLY REVEALED. WHAT PARTICULARLY
DISTURBS LOCAL COMMENTATORS IS NOT SO MUCH SUB-
STANCE OF THE CRITIQUE, WHICH INDEED IS RECOGNIZED
AS HAVING A FOUNDATION IN REALITY, AS THE PLACE
AND TIMING. MOREOVER, IT IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED
THAT RABIN HIMSELF APPROVED ARMS REQUESTS IN
PRINCIPLE IF NOT IN DETAIL, ADDING FURTHER BIZARRE
NOTE TO THIS OUTBURST.

3. ONE USUALLY WELL-INFORMED SOURCE HAS GIVEN US
FOLLOWING ANALYSIS OF WHY AND HOW RABIN CAME TO
BLAST PERES AND MOD FROM WASHINGTON. INCIDENT, HE
SAID, WAS RESULT OF MISUNDERSTANDING BY RABIN OF
"RULES OF THE GAME" AS PLAYED BY ISRAELI WASHINGTON PRESS
CORPS. UNLIKE BACKGROUNDERS GIVEN TO EDITORS AND
COMMENTATORS IN ISRAEL, RABIN HAD NO CONTROL OVER
WASHINGTON JOURNALISTS. MOREOVER, RABIN HAD BEEN
PROVOKED INTO SPONTANEOUS AND UNTHINKING REACTION IN MOMENT OF
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FATIGUE BY SERIES OF TOUGH AND PROBING QUESTIONS WHICH HAD
BEEN THROWN AT HIM, SOME BY JOURNALISTS KNOWN TO BE
CLOSE TO PERES. INDEED, SOURCE RECALLED, RABIN HAD
MADE SAME CRITICISMS ON SEVERAL RECENT OCCASIONS
HERE BUT THEY HAD NOT RECEIVED SUCH WIDESPREAD
PUBLIC DISSEMINATION.

4. THE DOMESTIC BACKGROUND: A) THE DEBATE OVER

MILITARY RESUPPLY. CURRENT FLAP COMES AGAINST BACK-GROUND OF LONG STANDING U.S./ISRAELI DISAGREEMENTS OVER BOTH QUANTITIES AND SPECIFIC ITEMS (PERSHING, F-15S, LANCES) IN ISRAEL'S SHOPPING LIST. MORE-OVER, PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE AND DEFENSE MINISTRY FOR MANY MONTHS HAVE BEEN IN OPEN DISSAGREEMENT AND WRANGLING OVER HANDLING OF MOD BUDGET, INCLUDING DECISION-MAKING PROCESS ON MILITARY AID REQUEST. B) INTERNAL POLITICAL RIVALRIES. THESE SUBSTANTIVE DISAGREEMENTS HAVE ALSO BEEN AFFECTED BY RIVALRY BETWEEN RABIN AND PERES GOING BACK TO APRIL 1974 COMPETITION BETWEEN THE TWO FOR THE PRIME MINISTERSHIP AFTER MEIR RESIGNATION. THIS RIVALRY IN TURN HAD BEEN EXACERBATED BY RABIN APPOINTMENT OF ARIEL SHARON IN JUNE 1975 AS HIS "GENSRAL ADVISOR"; THIS WAS SEEN AS EFFORT TO UNDERCUT AUTHORITY OF PERES AND COS GUR. SOME LOCAL OBSERVERS SEE CURRENT FLAP AS ATTEMPT BY RABIN TO ATTACK PERES ON EVE OF LABORHEARTY INTERNAL ELECTIONS AND CONVENTION THIS SUMMER.

5. DOMESTIC POLITICAL STORM AWAITS RABIN UPON HIS RETURN. LIKUD IS PLANNING TO INTRODUCE NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION IN KNESSET, CHARGING THAT INCIDENT HAS HARMED ISRAEL'S SECURITY INTERESTS AND POLITICAL PRESTIGE, AND THAT GOVERNMENT HAD CEASED TO FUNCTION AS IT SHOULD. IT IS EXPECTED THAT KNESSET WILL DISCUSS THE MOTION FEBRUARY 9, PRESUMABLY PERMITTING RABIN TO REPLY DIRECTLY TO THE CRITICISM UPON HIS RETURN. LABOR ALIGNMENT KNESSET FACTION WILL ALSO BE HOLDING INTERNAL CONSULTATIONS. PERES AND ALLON SO FAR HAVE AVOIDED PUBLIC REACTION, AND WE ARE TOLD THAT EFFORTS ARE PRESENTLY BEING MADE ON BOTH SIDES TO CALM THINGS DOWN.

6. AT THIS POINT, DIMENSIONS OF DIFFICULTIES CONFRONTING
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RABIN UPON HIS RETURN TO ISRAEL ARE HARD TO PREDICT. MUCH WILL DEPEND ON HOW PERES HANDLES THE SITUATION AND ON WHETHER SHARON, WHO HAS BEEN SINGULARLY QUIET FOR THE LAST FEW DAYS, CHOOSES TO EXPLOIT THE SITUATION. IF REPORTS NOTED ABOVE OF EFFORTS TO TONE DOWN THE CONTROVERSY ARE ACCURATE, THERE MAY WELL BE SHARP WORDS IN KNESSET DEBATE BUT NO POLITICAL CRISIS. HOWEVER, DAMAGE HAS BEEN DONE NOT ONLY TO THE CREDIBILITY OF FUTURE ISRAELI ARMS LISTS IN WASHINGTON BUT ALSO TO RABIN'S DOMESTIC STANDING. HIS OPPONENTS WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE LABOR ALIGNMENT HAVE NEW AND STRONG AMMUNITION AT THEIR DISPOSAL.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PRESS COMMENTS, POLITICAL STABILITY, MILITARY PROCUREMENT, PUBLIC ATTITUDES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 03 FEB 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: morefirh
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976TELAV00850
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760040-0901
From: TEL AVIV
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760285/aaaacxjb.tel
Line Count: 166
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: morefirh
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 07 JAN 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <07 JAN 2004 by morefirh>; APPROVED <07 Jan 2004 by morefirh>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CRITICISM OF MOD ARMS REQUEST EVOKES DOMESTIC STORM SUMMARY: CRITIQUE OF MOD ARMS REQUEST "SHOPPING LIST"
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, MASS, IS, US
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006